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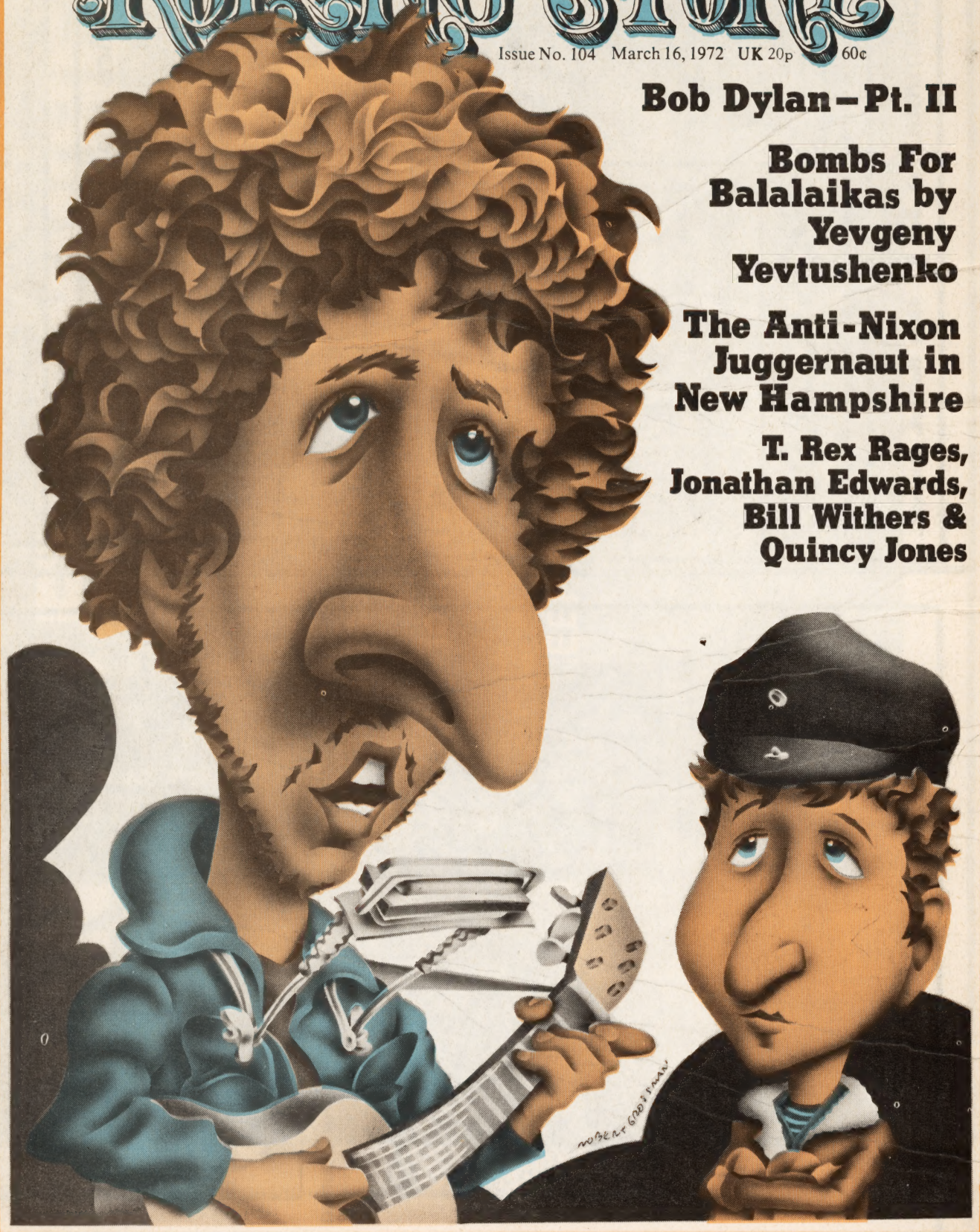

Bob Dylan—Pt. II

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The Anti-Nixon Juggernaut in New Hampshire

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Fear and Loathing:

The View From Key Biscayne

by Hunter S. Thompson

"I get the feeling that Muskie is starting to run scared. — but not for the same reasons I keep reading about. Sure, he's worried about Humphrey in Florida; he's worried about McGovern with the liberals, and he's worried about Lindsay doing—well, there's the catch: The Muskie people aren't afraid of Lindsay actually winning the nomination. . . . What worries them is that Lindsay might start doing well enough to force Kennedy into this thing."

—A Former Campaign Mgr. & Political Strategist

KEY BISCAYNE, FLORIDA—The ghost of Kennedy's Past hangs so heavy on this dreary presidential campaign that even the most cynical journalistic veterans of the Jack & Bobby campaign are beginning to resent it out loud. A few days ago in Jacksonville, creeping through the early morning traffic between the Hilton Hotel and the railroad depot, I was slumped in my seat feeling half alive and staring morosely at the front page of the Jacksonville Times-Union when I caught a few flashes of a conversation from behind my right ear:

". . . . getting a little tired of this goddamn ersatz Kennedy campaign . . . now they have Rosey Grier to sing 'Let the Sun Shine In' for us. . . . It seems like they'd be embarrassed . . ."

We were going down to the depot to get aboard the "Sunshine Special"—Ed Muskie's chartered train that was about to chug off on a run from Jacksonville to Miami—the whole length of Florida—for a series of "whistlestop" speeches in towns like Deland, Winterhaven and Sebring.

One of Muskie's Senate aides had told me, as we waited on a downtown streetcorner for the candidate's motorcade to catch up with the press bus, that "nobody has done one of these whistlestop tours since Harry Truman in 1948."

Was he kidding? I looked to be sure, but his face was dead serious. "Well . . ." I said. "Funny you'd say that . . . because I just heard some people on the bus talking about Bobby Kennedy's campaign trains in Indiana and California in 1968." I smiled pleasantly. "They even wrote a song about it: Don't tell me you never heard 'The Ruthless Cannonball' ?"

The Muskie man shook his head, not looking at me—staring intently down the street as if he had suddenly picked up the first distant vibrations from Big Ed's black Cadillac bearing down on us. I looked, but the only vehicle in sight was a rusty pickup truck from "Larry's Plumbing & Welding." It was idling at the stoplight: the driver was wearing a yellow plastic hardhat and nipping at a can of Schlitz. He glanced curiously at the big red/white/blue draped Muskie bus, then roared past us when the light changed to green. On the rear window of the cab was a small American flag decal, and a strip on the rear bumper said "President Kennedy."

Ed Muskie is a trifle sensitive about putting the Kennedy ghost to his own use, this year. He has ex-L.A. Rams tackle and onetime RFK bodyguard Roosevelt Grier singing songs for him, and one of his main strategists is a former RFK ally named John English . . . . but Muskie is far more concerned with the ghost of Kennedy Present.

We were sitting in the lounge car on Muskie's train, rolling through the jackpines of north Florida, when this question came up. I was talking to a dapper gent from Atlanta who was aboard the train as a special guest of Ed Muskie and who said that his PR firm would probably "handle Georgia" for the Democratic candidate, whoever it turned out to be.

"Who would you prefer?" I asked.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked. I could see that the question made him nervous.

"Nothing personal," I explained. "But on a purely professional, objective basis, which one of the Democratic candidates would be the easiest to sell in Georgia?"

He thought for a moment, then shrugged. "No question about it," he said. "Ted Kennedy."

"But he's not a candidate," I said.

He smiled. "I know that. All I did was answer your hypothetical question."

"I understand perfectly," I said. "But why Teddy? Isn't the stuff he's been recently saying a bit heavy for the folks in Georgia?"

"Not for Atlanta," he replied. "Teddy could probably carry The City. Of course he'd lose the rest of the state, but it would be close enough so that a big black vote could make the difference." He sipped his scotch and bent around on the seat to adjust for a new westward lean in the pitch and roll of the train. "That's the key," he said. "Only with a Kennedy can you get a monolithic black turnout."

"What about Lindsay?" I asked.

"Not yet," he said. "But he's just getting started. If he starts building the same kind of power base that Bobby had in '68—that's when you'll see Teddy in the race."

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This kind of talk is not uncommon in living rooms around Washington where the candidates, their managers and various ranking journalists are wont to gather for the purpose of "talking *serious* politics" — as opposed to the careful gibberish they distill for the public prints. The New Kennedy Scenario is beginning to bubble up to the surface. John Lindsay has even said it for the record: Several weeks ago he agreed with a reporter who suggested—at one of those half-serious, after-hours campaign trail jokes — that "the Lindsay campaign might just be successful enough to get Ted Kennedy elected."

This is not the kind of humor a long-shot presidential candidate likes to encourage in his camp when he's spending $10,000 a day on the Campaign Trail. But Lindsay seems almost suicidally frank, at times; he will spend two hours on a stage, dutifully haranguing a crowd about whatever topic his speechwriters have laid out for him that day . . . and 30 minutes later he will sit down with a beer and say something that no politician in his right mind would normally dare to say in the presence of journalists.

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One of the main marks of success in a career politician is a rooty distrust of The Press — and this cynicism is usually reciprocated, in spades, by most reporters who have covered enough campaigns to command a fat job like chronicling the Big Apple. Fifty years ago H. L. Mencken laid down the dictum that "The only way a reporter should look at a politician is *down*."

This notion is still a very strong factor in the relationship between politicians and the big-time press. On lower levels you find a tendency — among people like "national editors" on papers in Pittsburgh and Omaha — to treat *successful* politicians with a certain amount of awe and respect. But the prevailing attitude among journalists with enough status to work Presidential Campaigns is that all politicians are congenital thieves and liars.

This is usually true. Or at least as valid as the consensus opinion among politicians that The Press is a gang of swine. Both sides will agree that the other might occasionally produce an exception to prove the rule, but the overall bias is rigid . . . and, having been on both sides of that ugly fence in my time, I tend to agree. . . .

Which is neither here nor there, for right now. We seem to have wandered off again, and this time I can't afford the luxury of raving at great length about anything that slides into my head. So, rather, than miss another deadline, I want to zip up the nut with a fast and extremely pithy 500 words . . . because that's all the space available, and in two hours I have to lash my rum-soaked red convertible across the Rickenbacher Causeway to downtown Miami and then to the airport — in order to meet John Lindsay in either Tallahassee or Atlanta, depending on which connection I can make: It is nearly impossible to get either in or out of Miami this week. All flights are booked far in advance, and the hotel/motel space is so viciously oversold that crowds of angry tourists are "becoming unruly" — according to the Miami Herald — in the lobbies of places that refuse to let them in.

Fortunately, I have my own spacious suite attached to the new National Affairs office in the Royal Biscayne Hotel.

When things got too heavy in Washington I had no choice but to move the National Affairs desk to a place with better working conditions. Everybody agreed that the move was long overdue. After three months in Washington I felt like I'd spent three years in a mineshaft underneath Butte, Montana. My relations with the White House were extremely negative from the start; my application for press credentials was rejected out of hand. I wouldn't be needing them, they said. Because ROLLING STONE is a music magazine, and there is not much music in the White House these days.

And not much on Capitol Hill either, apparently. When I called the Congressional Press Gallery to ask about the application (for press credentials) that I'd filed in early November '71, they said they hadn't got around to making any decision on it yet — but I probably wouldn't be needing that one either. And where the hell did I get the gall to apply for "press" status at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions this summer?

Where indeed? They had me dead to rights. I tried to save face by arguing that political science has never conclusively *proven* that music and politics can't mix — but when they asked for *my* evidence I said, "Shucks, you're probably right. Why shit in your own bed, eh?"

"What?"

"Nevermind," I said. "I didn't really want the goddamn things, anyway."

Which was true. Getting barred from the White House is like being blackballed at the Playboy Club. There are definite advantages to having your name on the Ugly List in places like that.

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The move to Key Biscayne had a powerful effect on my humors. My suite in the Royal Biscayne Hotel is in a big palm grove on the beach and less than a mile from the Florida White House. Nixon is on the less desirable Biscayne Bay side of the Key; I face the Atlantic, sitting here at the typewriter on my spacious screen porch and I can hear the ocean bashing up against the seawall about 200 feet away.

Nobody is out there tonight. The spongy green lawn between here and the beach is empty, except for an occasional wild dog on the putting green. They like the dampness, the good footing and the high sweet smell of slow-rotting coconuts. I sit here on my porch, swilling rum, and work up a fine gut-level understanding of what it must feel like to be a wild dog.

Not much has been written on this subject, and when I have more time I'll get back to it — but not tonight; we still have to deal with the Lindsay-Kennedy problem.

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There is a certain twisted logic in Lindsay's idea that he might succeed beyond his wildest dreams and still accomplish nothing more than carving out a place for himself, in history, as the Gene McCarthy of 1972. At this stage of the '68 campaign, McCarthy was lucky to crack 5% in the Gallup Poll —the same percentage Lindsay is pulling today.

It was not until after New Hampshire — after McCarthy proved that a hell of a lot of people were taking him seriously — that Robert Kennedy changed his mind and decided to run instead of playing things safe and waiting for '72. That was the plan, based on the widespread assumption that LBJ would naturally run again and win a second term — thus clearing the decks for Bobby the next time around.

There is something eerie in the realization that Ted Kennedy is facing almost exactly the same situation today. He would rather not run: The odds are bad; his natural constituency has apparently abandoned politics; Nixon seems to have all the guns, and all he needs to make his life complete is the chance to stomp a Kennedy in his final campaign.

So it is hard to argue with the idea that Teddy would be a fool to run for President now. 1976 is only four years away, Kennedy is only 42 years old, and when Nixon bows out, the GOP will have to crank up a brand new champion to stave off the Kennedy challenge.

This is the blueprint, and it looks pretty good as long as there's not much chance of any Democrat beating Nixon in '72 — and especially not somebody like Lindsay, who would not only put Teddy on ice for the next eight years but also shatter the lingering menace of the "waiting for Kennedy" mystique. With John Lindsay in the White House, Ted Kennedy would no longer be troubled by questions concerning his own plans for the presidency.

Even a Muskie victory would be hard for Kennedy to live with — particularly if Lindsay shows enough strength to make Muskie offer him the vice-presidency. This would make Lindsay the Democratic heir apparent. Unlike Agnew — who has never been taken seriously, even by his enemies as anything but a sop to the yahoo/racist vote — Lindsay as vice-president would be so obviously Next in Line that Kennedy would have to back off and admit, with a fine Irish smile, that he blew it . . . the opening was there, but he didn't see it in time: while Lindsay did.

This is a very complicated projection and it needs a bit more thought than I have time to give it right now, because the computer says I have to leave for Atlanta at once — meet Lindsay in the Delta VIP hideout and maybe ponder this question at length, on the long run to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, if you listen to the wizards you will keep a careful eye on John Lindsay's action in the Florida primary . . . because if he looks good down here, and then ever better in Wisconsin, the wizards say he can start looking for some very heavy company . . . and that would make things interesting.

With both Kennedy and Lindsay in the race, a lot of people who weren't figuring on voting this year might change their minds in a hurry. And if nothing else it would turn the Democratic National Convention in Miami this July into something like a week-long orgy of sex, violence, and treachery.

Muskie could never weather a scene like that. God only knows who would finally win the nomination, but the possibilities — along with the guaranteed momentum that a media-spectacle of that magnitude would generate — are enough to make Nixon start plotting to stuff himself into the White House vegetable shredder.